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→ Spring 1997 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence
Prize Application

Winner

Instructor's name ANTONIA LOSANO

Department ENGLISH

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A SPACE OF OUR OWN : WOMEN'S EDUCATION & SPATIAL PRACTICES

title of assignment sequence

Instructor's signature

Date

Antonia Losano
5/8/97

Assignment Sequence: "A Space of Our Own: Women's Education and Spatial Practices"
Antonia Losano
105.4 Women and Writing: Interior Decorating

INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

The general theme for this course has been gender and space. We've explored various ways that spatial constraints can form behavior. Through readings of such texts as *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Girl, Interrupted*, we've discussed how incarceration can contribute to mental instability. Through *The Secret Garden* and *House on Mango Street*, we've discussed how space can affect childhood development, with particular emphasis on how space can contribute to racial or gendered oppression. The last section of the course focuses on how women can overcome spatial constraints, and achieve 'interior' autonomy, both material and psychological.

This sequence of eight assignments was given to my students over the course of three and a half weeks. The motivation behind this series was two-fold: first, I hoped the students would come to understand how identity and behavior are influenced by spatial constraints and considerations. Secondly, I wished to prepare students for a reading of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the final text for the course. One of the main themes of Woolf's essay is the materiality of existence, the impact of quotidian constraints upon behavior, and the significance--historically and ideologically--of those constraints. Woolf is also particularly concerned with spatial experience on a university campus; she raises questions about the interconnections between spatial practices and the dissemination of knowledge across gender and class. Through this assignment sequence, I hoped to allow students to discover for themselves some of those constraints, and come to a deeper understanding of Woolf's essay.

The rationale for the assignment sequence is as follows: the first two Pre-writing exercises introduce to students the idea of spatial constraint and freedom through personal experience. I think it's crucial for students to experience *in their own bodies* the sort of things Woolf talks about on her journey across college campuses and libraries. Also during this week, students were also asked to read, for class discussion, a chapter from Gillian Rose's book *Feminism and Geography*, called "Women and Everyday Spaces," which discusses various theories of daily spatial existence and provides students with some vocabulary and methodologies with which to report their findings. (The essay in particular offered several ways to visually record spatial movements, through time-space charts and other graphs.) The first essay (essay #8 for the course) asked students to focus in on one particular campus space, and perform an analysis of it, using the knowledge and methods gleaned from the first pre-writing assignments. Two anonymous drafts of this essay were shared with the whole class in a draft-workshop.

Meanwhile, students have begun Woolf's essay. Pre-writing 9a asks students to map Woolf's 'days' in the text, in a similar manner to their own experiential maps. Pre-writing 9b questions the connections between Woolf's presentation of her spatial experience (fraught with interruptions and distractions) and her argument (women haven't written great books because they have been interrupted too often), and involves group-work/in-class brainstorming. Pre-writing 9c asks students to discuss Woolf's solution to this problem--a room of one's own--in personal terms. Students described their own rooms or private spaces, exploring what it means to

them to have a room of their own (if they do!). Essay #9 is a full-fledged analysis of Woolf's essay. Students are asked to come up with their own thesis about Woolf's argument, as it relates to gender and space. Some students opted to write on issues of space and economics or class. Pre-writing 9d (another in-class writing followed by group-work in which students read their writing to their partners) asks students to sketch out their thesis in a "prospectus" and describe their path toward that thesis (just as Woolf did in her essay!). In preparation for Essay #9, pre-writing 9d also asks students to gather all the writings in this sequence--8a through 9d--in front of them, and re-read and re-discover things which would assist in the writing of Essay #9.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

1.

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Essay #8

Pre-writing 8a

For this pre-writing you will need your body and a notebook. Choose a representative day in your life (a week-day may be best) and keep a record of every place you go. Map out your day and your activities. Where do you go? What do you do there? How do you get there? What do you do as you walk/ride/drive? Where can't you go? Why? What rules of behavior must you follow in particular places? Keep note, too, of how you feel in particular spaces--what you think of in various places on campus or around town, and how *where you are* might affect what's in your brain.

Write up your findings in some readable fashion--you can make detailed charts, write a linear narrative, draw pictures, whatever. You can use Gillian Rose's examples of time-space and other mapping techniques, or invent your own.

Due: Friday, April 11

Essay #8
Pre-writing 8b

Take a look, now, over your pre-writing 7a. With the eye of a sociologist, feminist, or cultural critic, comment on the significance of your experience. What do your findings tell you about campus spacial practices? About the politics of space? Does Cornell work to keep you in certain spaces, or do you have unlimited freedom? Do your spacial discoveries tell you anything about the way knowledge is disseminated at Cornell?

How does the structure of space on Cornell campus influence, direct, mold, or manipulate its inhabitants (faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduates, visitors, town-residents)?

You might think about traffic (foot or car) patterns, the quad structure, the organization of libraries or dorms, the places for food consumption, etc. How are different activities organized or restricted? Where do people of different classes, races, genders tend to go? Why?

Write up an analysis of your own experience in 2 pages.

Due: Monday, April 14

Essay Assignment # 8
The Space of Campus Life

Part One

Spend a few days exploring a particular place or buildings which seemed particularly fruitful to you in your pre-writing analysis. Take a notebook, take lots of notes. Who uses the building? Who goes where? How is the building structured (halls, rooms, ceilings, doors open or shut, furniture for lounging or not, organization of activities within the space, etc.)? Interview people; talk to folks who use the building regularly. Explore. Think about how you think the structure and organization of the building influences what goes on within it, and how people feel about being there.

Organize your data into clear, typed notes. Include charts, diagrams, whatever you need to get across the information you discovered.

These notes are due Wednesday, April 16. You should have about 5 pages of notes, diagrams, etc.

Part Two

For this part, you will write a formal paper/report of your findings in Part One. Write up what you discovered about YOUR special Cornell space, focusing on an interpretation of the data. You MUST have some sort of argument here--you should be making a firm statement about one particular aspect of one particular space on campus. You can even be urging for a change in spacial arrangements on campus--or you can just be enlightening your readers about an unconscious, unperceived influence in their daily lives. Don't try to explain everything--just choose one angle to examine. [For example, you could argue that Olin library segregates graduate students from faculty by *certain structural means*.] This is in essence a research-and-analysis essay, so you'll need to include both hard data and interpretive suggestions. You are trying to understand how the structure and organization of the building influences what goes on within it, and how space makes people what they are.

Intended Audience--Be sure for this paper to pick an audience, announce it in your title, and write to/for that audience:

Cornell's board of directors; architects planning the renovation of campus spaces; interested incoming students; anyone concerned with the spacial politics of university life.

Particulars:

4 pages. Due Friday, April 18

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Essay #9

Pre-writing 9a

Using, perhaps, the same techniques you used to map your own day (in pre-writing 7a), map Virginia Woolf's day, as she describes it in Chapter One of *A Room of One's Own*. Where does she go? Where is she prevented from going? Keep a close watch as well for her **mental travels**. How do they correspond to her physical travels? Again, you are welcome to organize this visually, with charts and drawings, or create a purely verbal narrative.

2 pages

Due: Monday, April 21

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Essay #9

Pre-writing 9b

In-class Writing

Now I want you to focus on the style, language and structure of Woolf's essay. Given your raw data in pre-writing 9a, what links can you find between Woolf's argument (her overall project, her thesis, crux, whatever!) and the autobiographical "story" she narrates? Focus in particular on Chapters 2 & 3 of *A Room of One's Own*. How is Woolf's library and literary research connected to the style of her argument? To answer this, you will have to examine Woolf's research methodology as if you were a teacher. How does she go about proving her thesis? Is she general or focused? What is she out to prove, anyway? And how is her own experience, the actual physical paths she takes, connected to her argument in the essay? Brainstorm these questions in your groups, then do a free-writing on your findings.

15 minutes to discuss with your group-mates; 15 minutes to write

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Essay #9

Pre-writing 9c

Woolf's solution to the problem of women and fiction (and women and a whole lot of other things) is that women must have money and a room of their own if they are to write anything of value. On Wednesday in class we decided that money is definitely an issue! But what about a room of one's own? Do you agree with this final solution?

Think about your own private space(s), whatever and where ever it may be. For your free-writing, briefly describe that space, and comment on whether it might fit Woolf's requirement. Is it a place in which you can be creative, be free? If you don't have a private space, examine this lack in your life. Does it matter to you? Do you fantasize about having a room of your own?

2 pages

Due: Friday, April 25

Essay Assignment #9
The Final Analysis!!!

For your final paper (wheweee!!!), write a 6 page essay on some aspect of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. You should concentrate on issues of space and gender, and explore Woolf's treatment of this theme through some specific stylistic technique, metaphor, passage or constellation of ideas in the book. Feel free to tackle Woolf argumentatively; many of you have expressed problems with her work which might turn into productive essays. You are welcome to use your own experiences with campus and intellectual life, but try to make Woolf's work the main focus of your essay. We've discussed issues of female friendship and community; the material basis for woman's existence; women's education; mothers and foremothers; the space of the female body--each would be a good place to start your inquiry. I'm leaving the specific topic for this one largely up to you, but please wander by my office hours to discuss your interests!

Audience: me, Virginia Woolf herself, readers interested in Woolf's work

Particulars: 6 pages, minimum. You should have some idea of your topic by April 28th, for an in-class writing. Anonymous drafts (just 2 pages) due Wednesday, April 31. Final paper due May 2.

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Essay #9

Pre-writing Id

In-class writing

In your small groups, explain to your group mates your intended topic and argument for your final paper. Try to distinguish carefully between the general topic you are interested in and what your final argument might be. If you don't know your final argument, all the better. Instead, list some questions you are planning to explore in your final essay. Discuss some problems you have with the text. Next, lay out in front of you all the writings you've done in this section (8a-9c). Think about what those previous writings can contribute to your present endeavor. After all members have shared their projects, elect a scribe and as a group create 2-3 sentences describing each group member's project. Turn these in at the end of class.

RESULTS & REFLECTIONS

The close-focus of this section of the course worked well. In previous sections of the course, I think I assigned too much reading! But for the last three weeks, we really concentrated on Woolf and the idea of facing, and overcoming, spatial constraint.

Pre-writing 8a generated wonderful "essays"—mostly visual accounts, some extremely imaginative, of students' days. Pre-writing 8b was great for class discussion; on the day that assignment was due we had a fruitful discussion of campus politics. Students debated the eternal 'chicken and egg' question: do quiet people frequent one wing of Trillium because it's quieter, or is it quieter because quiet people frequent it? Students discussed the stereotyping of individuals based on their spacial existence: where they live, where they eat, etc.

Pre-writing 8b was harder, although much of the class discussion about 8a helped students to understand what the significance of their findings might be. Most of the students argued that Cornell did not segregate according to gender, but according to race and class and intellectual interest--and although this is supposed to be a course on gender issues, I find it incredibly fruitful when students "rebel" against the gender hypothesis, because it generates *other* readings. Sometimes it's easier to start a paper by saying "Something is NOT something; it is something else entirely."

If ever I give Essay #8 to another class, I will modify it. Students really needed to be able to contrast two spaces to be able to fully understand one space--the best papers I got were ones which compared two campus spaces with similar functions but radically different "personalities." So I think I would design a pre-writing exercise which asks students to compare two places, and then have the final paper be about just one place, with an argument about it.

Pre-writing 9a was, I think, the most successful part of this assignment sequence. Students were so attuned, by this point, to the importance of space in their own lives, that they could immediately feel for Woolf in her aborted walk through Oxbridge, and connect her spacial oppression with other issue in the text.

9b was more difficult! Although I have really pushed close-reading this semester, students still seem to find discussions of the formal aspects of texts disagreeable. Some groups did, however, cotton on to the idea that Woolf's research methods were as "wandering" and abortive as her physical motions; another group did a wonderful job examining Woolf's spacial metaphors, and drawing connections between them and her overall argument.

9c generated beautiful personal essays intermingled with some heavily Marxist critiques of Woolf (arguing that BOTH money AND that room of her own are inextricably linked to class and economic factors and can't be separated, even metaphorically). One student drew a wonderful picture of her own room, complete with annotated bubbles pointing to crucial places and objects within her room.

The final papers aren't in yet, so I can't really comment on how I should rearrange the assignment. I'm a bit wary of the broadness of the assignment, but the students asked for a bit more freedom in designing their final essay, so I gave it to them. Discussions in my office have been interesting. One student is planning a comparative essay on space and gender in Woolf and Bronte's Jane Eyre; another student is doing a Malay version of A Room of One's Own, trying to imagine how it would need to be rewritten for a different culture and time.

All in all, I've been extremely pleased with the results of this assignment sequence. I would definitely approach Woolf's very difficult text this way again!